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Restoring Igbo dignity – Ike and Adichie on the University of Nigeria

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Abstract

Someone said that the University of Nigeria, which, fifty years on, remains one of the country's major achievements, was a dream come true. Envisioned many years before Independence, it eventually opened its gates on 7th October 1960 and classes began ten days later with an enrolment of 220 students and 13 academic members of staff. Since then, thousands of students and staff from all over the world have settled on its Nsukka and Enugu campuses to study, research and join in a unique experiment. This chapter considers the impact of UNN on Nigerian literature, focusing on Ike's *Naked Gods* (1970), and Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2004) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), the only three Nigerian novels focusing on the University of Nigeria. It shows these texts as key documents, revealing UNN, the only Nigerian HE institution developed in a rural setting, as both a citadel of learning and a world in itself, whose influence permeated the whole region and extended far beyond. Whereas *The Naked gods* (1970) evokes the beginnings of the University, its main campus under construction and the negotiating of the University administrative structures between the British and the Americans under the critical eye of the side-lined indigenous staff and local traditional authorities, Adichie's novels, published in 2004 and 2006, complement Ike's picture as they paint a very different University, now totally manned by Nigerians and where expatriates are on the way out. They equally differ in other ways: whereas Ike chose to focus on the University as a workplace, Adichie presents it as a residential area, a village and a web of close-knit relationships. This comparative study highlights UNN's intellectual impact on both its students and staff and on the nation-building process.

Key words: University of Nigeria (UNN) – Ike – Adichie – Comparative literature - History

Someone said that the University of Nigeria, which, fifty years on, remains of the major achievements of the country, was a dream come true. Envisioned as early as 1919 (Booker 2003: 278) and inspired by Azikiwe, the University of Nigeria (UNN), the first Nigerian University to be built after Independence, was established by a law passed in 1955, which already mentioned its two campuses, to be located in Nsukka (UNN) and Enugu (UNEC), in the then Eastern Region (now Enugu State). Yet most of the books on Nigeria tend to often ‘forget’ UNN or give it only a polite nod while focusing on other Nigerian HE institutions, particularly Ibadan (UI), as Williams (2005) who only mentions UI (176), Ahmadu Bello University (ABU), Zaria (299) and Bayero University, Kano (306).¹ Given the historical and strategic importance of UNN, one would have thought that Nigerian literature in English, which has since *Things Fall apart* (1958) yielded a rich harvest of novels, plays, novellas, poetry and memoirs, would have acknowledged its impact. Yet only two authors have so far given a prominent role, in their fictional works, to the University of Nigeria: Chukwuemeka Ike and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. This comparative study considers the presentation of UNN in Ike’s *The Naked Gods* (1970), and Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* (2004) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), all set on the Nsukka Campus. It shows these texts as key documents to understand the history of the University and evaluate its intellectual influence on both its students and staff and the nation-building process.

Striving towards excellence

Azikiwe², addressing the Eastern House of Assembly on May 18, 1955 as the then Premier of the Eastern Region, expressed his views on the future University:

We must aim at giving the whole of our education locally, and, where it is essential that an African should go to Europe for the final steps to enter a profession, we must arrange our system in such a manner that his absence will be reduced to the shortest possible time and the foundations of his character firmly laid before he goes. [...] I hope that the curricula of the university will be related to the day-to-day life of our people and that they will be so organized as to relate the mission of the university to the social and economic needs of the Region, [...] complementary with the Ibadan University College, co-operating with it, drawing inspiration from its efforts, and gaining experience from this pioneer institution of higher education in this country.³

Dreams became reality in April 1959 with the appointment of the provisional Council chaired by Azikiwe and whose members were Dr T. Olawale Elias and Dr. Okechukwu Ikejiani from Nigeria, Mr. J.S. Fulton from the United Kingdom, Dr. Marguerite Cartwright⁴ and Dr. Eldon Lee Johnson from the United States. Modelled after the American university system, UNN eventually opened its gates on 7th October 1960 to its first 220 students and 13 academic staff “made up of about half, Americans, and the other half, Nigerians and British [...], an international group and in the Nigerian context, an intertribal group that started the major influence on Nsukka” (Ilogu 1974:101). Classes began ten days later in its six degree-conferring Faculties and twenty diploma-conferring Institutes.

From the start, Nsukka chose to distance itself from the policies and programmes of Ibadan by offering an ‘open door’ admissions policy (Hanson 1968:358), vocational and professional programmes of study, a General Studies (GS) programme for all students – a “major innovation” (Hanson 1968: 26) - and a mixed residential policy combining campus and off campus models. These differences, which led to a power struggle between Brits and Americans, centred on cursus models and content and reflected disagreements within Government circles concerning the aims and objectives of Institutions of Higher Education in the country. Financed equally by the then Eastern Region and the Federal Government, and initially assisted by the Ford Foundation, the USAID and the Michigan State University (Lebeau 2003: 225), UNN adopted the motto ‘to restore the dignity of man’ which summarised its mission - “to seek the truth about our cultural identity, to explore our environment and by studying our own past, expose to the outside world the truth of our existence” (Ijomah 1986: 9). It immediately started setting the pace for excellence. An NCE (National Certificate of Education)⁵ programme was introduced in June 1961 by the then Head of Education, Professor Hanson. That same year, the Enugu campus of the University, which today houses the College of Medicine, the School of Dentistry, and the Faculties of Business Administration, Environmental Studies, Health Science and Technology, and Law, took over the 200 hectares of land of the Nigeria College of Arts, Science and Technology.

The Biafran war soon threatened those early efforts. First, in 1966-1967, the University had to absorb a great number of refugees. Among them were several Igbo scholars coming from the other first generation universities (Ibadan, Lagos, Ife and Zaria) where they faced a growing insecurity following the mass killing of Igbo people in the north. These included Achebe who left Lagos and took the position of Senior Research Fellow at UNN in 1967. Nsukka town, whose campus already housed some 4,000 students, was one of the first to be captured by the Nigerian forces in July 1967. The occupation of the campus by the federal infantry, announced by the BBC, with “pictures of Nigerian soldiers entering the university town of Nsukka [...] shown in London” (Mezu 1971:69), took “a symbolic dimension, Igbo intellectuals being accused of having played a key role in preparing the secession” (Bach 1986:88).⁶ This explains that “for a long time [after the fall of the town], Biafra never accepted the loss of Nsukka” (Oyewole 1975:59).

After the war, the University “founded on optimism” (Obiechina 1986: xvi) started rebuilding its ravaged campuses and academic programmes, thanks to its staff’s determination. In 1972, Astronomer Samuel Ejikeme Okoye, a Cambridge-trained radio astronomer, founded the Space Research Centre (SRC), one of the few African research institutions offering courses in astronomy at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Okeke 2000). In 1974, the first open heart surgery in independent sub-Saharan Africa was successfully carried out by the College of Medicine in the University Teaching Hospital (UNTH), Enugu. In those days, the University was “the academic showpiece and intellectual melting pot of Nigeria. Graduates of UNN outclassed and outperformed their peers from other institutions. In the early days of the National Youth Service Corps program, graduates of other Universities turned in admiration and amazement to anyone who introduced herself or himself as a graduate of UNN” (Nebo 2006:1). UNN remained a regional university, owned by the then Eastern Government, until 1975 – at the time, Nsukka, Ife and Zaria were manned by State Governments whereas Ibadan and Lagos were cared for by the Federal Government.⁷ It was then taken over by the Federal Government. In the years that followed, the attraction of UNN hardly suffered from the appearance of additional universities as it went on to contribute in building the academic

staff of the new HE institutions. In 1976, Achebe, who had left the University to lecture in the States, came back as Professor of English Literature. By November 1981, while improving the face of the campus, soon to be considered as “state-of-the-art” (Bach 1986:189), the University was on the verge of implementing a programme of correspondence education for non-residence-based students.⁸

Ilogu (1974:101) acknowledged the huge impact of the new university on its immediate vicinity “as a large concentration of faculty and students suddenly descended on village peoples only very lightly touched by modern influence” – an impact captured by Ike’s 1970 novel. This was later followed by the planting of churches “characterised as Pentecostal-prayer-healing and sometimes prophetic [...] mainly influenced by people from the University” (Ilogu 1974:102) which ended up changing the religious landscape of the town substantially. But UNN’s influence was not limited to Nsukka town or even Enugu State. The University of Nigeria, Alma Mater of thousands of proud students, and a hub of research where many intellectuals built careers and international profiles, birthed several campuses into full-fledged universities. A case in point is the University of Calabar which was up till 1976 a campus of the University of Nigeria. The brain drain which adversely affected major Nigerian universities in the 1980s and 1990s, resulting in “the decline of publications from Nigerian universities and publishers” (Lebeau 1997: 34), left UNN bereft of most of its top-ranking members of staff. It benefited, in turn, a number of foreign universities, especially in the USA, traditional destination for UNN scholars and graduates.⁹

The early 1990s, which proved a very difficult period for Nigerian Universities, still saw UNN welcoming a number of postgraduates from neighbouring African countries. As mentioned by a Cameroonian student (Lebeau 1997: 259), “when you come from abroad, it is really Ibadan that matters, followed by Nsukka and ABU.” Yet, at that time of recession, most Cameroonian students turned to UNN as a preferred location for postgraduate studies, because of its relative proximity to Cameroon, and the School of Postgraduate Studies enrolled a number of them. Over the years, thousands of students and scholars from all over the world have

settled on UNN campuses to study, research and join in a unique experiment.¹⁰ In 2006, the University was invited by the Federal Ministry of Education to take over the National Institute of Nigerian Languages (NINLAN), Aba in Abia State. NINLAN, built on 209.5 open hectares of land, eventually became the third campus of the University on 25th July 2008 under the direction of Prof. Clara Ikekeonwu,¹¹ changing its name to ‘Aba Campus/ Institute of Nigerian Languages of UNN (UNNAC)’. In 2008-2009, one of the new scientific projects based at UNN, and meant to tackle food shortage, focused on the strengthening of local biotechnology capacity and the development of genetic engineering strategies for Nigerian indigenous crops, through ICT-based research and training in collaboration with Nigerian scientists throughout Igboland and in the Diaspora. And 2009 was the year UNN won the HP (Hewlett-Packard) Innovation in Education Grant Award.

Vying for power

The Naked gods (1970) stands at the threshold of a brand new era, and, under a fictitious name, evokes the Nsukka campus as it was in the early days, under construction in “that wilderness they call a university” (146),¹² a rural, isolated spot which people at the time felt was an “ill-advised location” (91), stretching over hectares of hilly savannah, about sixty-five kilometres north of Enugu.¹³ Towards the end of the novel, the author describes the site as it lay: “The Vice-Chancellor could see heaps of sand at the site for the auditorium as his car slowly moved down the Drive. [...] Half way down the Drive a new branch road was beginning to take shape; when completed it would lead to the site for the Faculties of Agriculture, Forestry and Veterinary Medicine yet to be established” (247). The novel centres on the painful negotiating of the University administrative structures between the British and the Americans under the critical eye of the sidelined indigenous staff, a situation well known to the author who had been the Nsukka Campus Assistant-Registrar (1960-63) and Registrar (1963-71). In the background, the local traditional authorities seize every opportunity to remind the University authorities of their ownership of the Institution, while rumours of

disquiet reveal a highly politicised student body. Ike's novel is also prophetic in some respects, sketching what many will recognise as distinctive traits of the University of Nigeria in the early 1970s.

At the beginning of the novel, we learn that the University of Songhai opened in September 1962 just a year after Redland gained its independence and changed its name to Songhai. The new institution is widely considered "a first-rate university" (10), whose aim is "to arrest the flow of our boys and girls to overseas universities" and train them locally "to tackle our local problems" (16). The Government expects the new institution to "solve the manpower problems not only of Songhai but also of many other African countries" (91). The campus is presented as "a miniature United Nations", a reference to its multinational, heterogeneous population, its "politically conscious" undergraduates as well as its crucial role in nation-building (225). Nevertheless, those who volunteered to join the staff and help set the new institution on its feet have to put up with uncomfortable conditions: the place is still without telephone lines; each of the professorial houses is "a very mighty double-storied house" (44) but assistant-lecturers are housed in cramped "bachelor-type chalets" (158) and the Vice-Chancellor stays in a log hut, pending the completion of his permanent quarters.

The first page sets the tone as the town, in the person of its traditional ruler, visits the University represented by its Vice-Chancellor, the scene illustrating the "town and gown" concept (9) of cooperation between the town and the University.¹⁴ Within the University, the Songhaians, the Americans and the British form three distinct groups. The first group is represented by some of the lecturers: Mr. Etuk, Mr. Osita and Mr. Opara (assistant-lecturers), Dr. Okoro (lecturer), and Prof. Ikin who was made a University Professor without a doctorate in consideration of his long teaching experience. The second group is at the helm of affairs with the Vice-Chancellor, Dr. Wilson, assisted by Profs Textor and Turner - nicknamed "professors with more money than sense" (10) in view of their lavish lifestyle - who "belonged to a team of visiting professors made available to the University under the American Save the Underdeveloped Nations Scheme (SUNS)"

(10) – a fictitious name for USAID. As for the British contingent, it is in the minority, with only two men: Prof. Brown and the Registrar Mr. Toogood, whose influence in Songhai University is considered as “negligible” (46).

Behind the big egos and personalities, the novel pitches two foreign powers in fierce competition, with the former colonial master slowly losing ground as the Americans push their way in, following “months of shrewd calculation” (172). The latter consider the British ideas on Higher Education as “outmoded” (226) and the British professors as “more interested in planting the British flag on the campus than in [...] the future of Songhai as a nation” (231). Even though they are yet to recognise the University of Songhai as a full-fledged University, Americans regard the University as strategic in strengthening American interests in the country and beyond - the gateway to the rest of the continent and their “one opportunity to plant the American type university in Africa” (12). They are determined therefore not to “abandon Songhai University to the British, not for anything” (174) and plan to encourage close links between Songhai scholars and the US while persuading their Home Office to send “more visiting professors and encourage our good men to spend their sabbaticals here” (12).

One of the places which bear the brunt of this Titans’ fight is the Senate, seen by the Americans as “a British institution” carried over from the colonial past but whose establishment has the full support of the British Ambassador, because it is expected to bring the new institution within the British circle of influence. Considering that “the British have had their day in Redland”, the Americans now want “to have [their] day in Songhai” (11). The Brits retaliate in covert ways: Brown and Toogood try to exclude the two American Professors from Senate on the ground that they never got appointed to Songhai University. They are equally keen to ensure that only Professors be recommended for VC’s position, and that British external assessors be used for promotion cases, to ensure that Professors “keep their club highly exclusive” (180). The Americans respond by preparing a list of minimum qualifications for Songhai Professors, including “high academic

accomplishments evidenced by an earned PhD, a firm commitment to the philosophy of Songhai University, and proven administrative competence” (225).

Britain “regarded its educational system as one of its greatest bequests to its former colonies and an enduring bond uniting it to its existing and former territories” (178) and its official posture was that the leaders of both Britain and Songhai had in their public pronouncements affirmed their determination to maintain the bonds of friendship between the two countries. Plans were drawn therefore to link the University to the UK: in particular,

Professor Brown undertook to develop a series of three public lectures on the growth of world universities, ostensibly it would be an attempt to place Songhai University in its wider context, but primarily it would be a means of selling some important ideas on university education to the undergraduates. The British Ambassador would supplement the lectures by providing an opportunity for some student leavers to spend part of their undergraduate careers in British universities” (181).

Yet the British Ambassador in Songhai was heard to say that his Government “could not care a farthing if Songhai University passed completely into American hands [as] Britain did not have the resources to compete” (178). The rather lukewarm attitude of the British towards the University of Songhai could be partly explained by all manners of administrative problems: “student demonstrations over puerile demands, local dignitaries seeking all manner of favours, hypersensitive council members who allow nationalism to blind them to the most obvious facts of life” (20). As for the Americans, they attributed the troubles at the University to its “impossible administrative structure”, described as “a system which has no merit whatsoever” inherited from “some ancient British Universities” and “out of step with the progressive and challenging philosophy of this University”, and to “the lack of esprit de corps within the campus community” (225).¹⁵ The disagreement between the two foreign bodies resulted in a paralysis aptly described by one junior lecturer: “petty squabbles all the time. No action by the authorities. [...] The disgraceful charm incident: no action. Student protests over food services: no action. [...] I’ve lost count of the number of committees which have been set up during this one short year. Not one of them has produced anything” (191).

Watching the situation closely, standing between the University authorities and the locals, the local Chief, His Royal Highness (HRH) Ezeonuku III of Onuku is portrayed as a corrupt potentate basking in luxury “among people stricken with abject poverty” (10) and manoeuvring to profit from what he considers as his personal property - as he puts it: “this is my place. This University is my own” (7). The American Vice-Chancellor has been warned by the Provisional Council, the governing body of the University, that his compatriots should “not only to be tactful in their relationships with the people of Onuku who had provided a two thousand acre site for the University and promised to add another thousand acres to it, but also to be particularly courteous to His Royal Highness, whose word was law in Onuku” (7). He therefore seeks to respond to the pressures from HRH by drawing plans for an entrance boulevard “to provide fast communication between the University and Capital City” (246).

Ike gives us a glimpse of the University campus at the end of the novel, a description which highlights the importance of this vital relationship between the University, Onuku town and the Capital City:

The Onuku end of the boulevard took the form of a gigantic roundabout. A British sculptor had been commissioned to produce a fitting fountain for the roundabout, and was working feverishly to meet the September deadline. Roads to different parts of Onuku province and beyond fanned out from the roundabout. [...] A three-mile long dual carriage way led from the gigantic roundabout straight into the University campus [...], huge concrete slabs laid side by side, and a paved walk for pedestrians flanked it on both sides. Ornamental trees were being planted all along. [...] Work was still going on at the campus end of the road. A check-point-cum-information post was nearing completion at the campus gateway (246).

The second description of the campus, a page later, introduces the visitor to the campus and its various areas: Onuku Drive, “the major road within the campus [...] was deliberately designed [...] to avoid the main centres of student activities and the staff residential areas, in order to minimise the risk of accidents. It was also intended to provide the visitor in a hurry with more than a bird’s eye view of the campus without alighting from his car” (247).

The plight of the Songhaians

For the time being, the local chief, having very little regard for educated Songhaians, prefers dealing with the Americans and, once his claim on the land clearly expressed, goes on to complain about the perceived preference given to the ‘River people’¹⁶ in the recruitment of administrative staff: “in spite of the promises made by the founders of the University, he [the registrar] has refused to employ Onuku people. Why? Because that his River City clerk wants only his own people to work here. You should not allow your Registrar to kill people’s interest in this University” (9). To try and repair what he sees as an imbalance, he acts by proxy and tries to influence decisions by manipulating the provisional Council: Dr. Fiofuma, PhD in pedagogy, USA; Chief Ibe, a businessman; Honourable Asa, MP for the village hosting the campus, and Rev. Ifon whose daughter is a student at Songhai. All these are either University academics or old time friends or boys of the chief who manoeuvred to get them into the Council, when the Prime Minister asked him to suggest suitable people. The town people remain in the background, yet quietly interfere with daily life on campus in a number of ways.¹⁷ The local chief explains (134) that the chairman of the provisional council, Mr. Coker, has a debt towards him, as the Chief’s father saved the Chairman’s father from starvation in the past. Villagers are quick to spot the weak points of the lecturers and exploit them to their advantage, stewards providing village girls for the pleasure of the lonely American Professors, and Ebenebe the renowned medicine-man preparing concoctions and charms for the frustrated lecturers.

There are twenty academic and senior administrative staff on campus at Songhai, and the Songhaian lecturers’ profile replicates that of the few Nigerian lecturers recruited during the early days of UNN. They all got their qualifications from Britain or America, came back full of expectations and work long and hard to establish their Departments and programmes of studies. The plight of junior lecturers is the direct result of the path they chose, and this provides an insight into the perceived differences between the British and American systems as presented in the novel. Etuk and Osita left secondary school the same year. Etuk then

went to the USA and got an MA there, while Osita went to Britain where he obtained a B.Sc. Economics with first class after spending two years in a Sixth Form College¹⁸. He then embarked on a PhD but could not complete it before leaving Britain, in spite of his British Professor's support, because the Registrar at Songhai University insisted that he was needed back home. Both are now employed at Songhai University but Osita, penalised for his choice of the British education system, is paid less than Etuk. Etuk himself, meanwhile, came back from the US without his PhD but now thinks: "the experience I've gained at this university in this one academic year is worth more than two PhDs" (156). Okoro on the other hand got a PhD in the US, but, unknown to his fellow Songhaians, was forced, in order to get it, to attend "a tenth-rate Negro University because no decent university would take him" (26). Another assistant-lecturer is waiting for his American counterpart to arrive before he can travel for a three-year graduate study programme.

The lecturers' struggle did not end abroad. Now back home, they face a demanding schedule, heavy workloads, the traditional respect for hierarchy and seniority turned tyranny, and an often hostile administration that seems to block their promotion¹⁹. Authorities regard them as having no brains (157) and rely on the students - "the most reliable barometer for reading the popularity of any member of staff" (21) - to assess the lecturers.²⁰ In the small circle which constitutes the University, with all living on campus, private life tends to constantly interfere with people's work life. Junior lecturers in particular complain that they "would all work harder if [...] assured that hard work pays. Otherwise some of [them] who've been labouring single-handed to establish full-scale departments from nothing will be dethroned after [they]'ve done the spade work, to give way to persons better qualified to be designated heads of departments" (23). Most are already married with children yet badly paid and living in cramped quarters: one has to wait for his wife to put their two kids to bed "so he could type his application and continue his research work in peace and quiet" (162). Infidelity cannot be hidden for long and gossip is rife. In a bid to encourage outward morality, the VC introduced a clause about 'moral turpitude' (163) in lecturers' contracts and is now accused of meddling in staff's private affairs.

The need to publish in order to be promoted and the lack of equipment and research facilities face junior lecturers with a constant challenge, and several pages of the novel are devoted to the issue. Osita boasts that “in [his] one year here, in spite of the hardly existent research facilities, [he has] already published one paper and had the second accepted by the leading learned journal in Economics” (161), while neither Prof. Ikin nor Dr. Okoro have “any publication to [their] name” (161). These assistant-lecturers do not therefore respect the professors and Ike uses them to paint a bleak picture of the new University. For them, “there are no more than one or two intellectuals in the University [...] This is the only university in which dons spend all their time scheming or dispensing charms or running after village girls and colleagues’ wives – concerned with everything but the traditional preoccupation of intellectuals” (p.158). We are told that the reason why lecturers do not publish is that they seem to believe that they “can rise to eminence through politicking” (162). The frustrated Osita, who studied in Britain and does not believe in charms, is now actively looking for vacancies to move to another West African University. As they say, “the crucial thing is that our intellectual community has been laid bare for what it is worth. The public now knows that we devote all our time to building camps around personalities rather than to academic pursuits” (160).

Ike’s lecturers do also have their own views on the competition taking place at the level of the central administration. Prof. Ikin considers the American system of education “so flexible that a clever student could exploit it to his advantage, thus ensuring that he obtained the PhD degree with very little worry” (112). For Osita, “it is men who are not proud of their first degrees who cover up with the PhD”, and “it’s in countries where the first degree has very little meat that the PhD assumes overall importance” (p.161). After all, Prof. Brown, who has been engaged in University teaching and has “a long list of publications” (162), does not have a PhD. One of the running topics of discussion in the novel is the plan for a native to take over from the American VC at the end of his three-year contract, as this “would be in the national interest and in consonance with the sovereign status of Songhai” (12) - but there are only two potential candidates. Dr.

Okoro, “the only Songhaian PhD in the staff” (23), who just returned from the US with a PhD, seems to favour the American system as “the only hope for an underdeveloped country such as Songhai” (p.13), but this is his first post and first year of experience in lecturing. Prof. Ikin, an older man and experienced teacher, unfortunately only holds a BA in philosophy obtained in his early forties, and a diploma in education, both from a British University, and has no intention to get a PhD; he is representative of many educated Songhaians of those days, men dedicated to the betterment of generations of children and who taught for decades in mission schools. Prof. Ikin and his wife are presented as pawns in the hands of Americans and British: the Vice-Chancellor plans to send them to the States for a year to impress them with the American higher education system and win them over by the conferment of a honorary degree on Prof. Ikin “on the strength of his contribution to the cause of education in Songhai” (198-199).²¹ The British, on their part, think that “it would be a good idea if our Ambassador could persuade our Government to invite Professor and Mrs Ikin to spend a month in Britain on their way home, as guests of the British Universities Congress. That month would be enough to undo whatever the year in America might have done. Moreover, it would identify Britain with the grooming of the Vice-Chancellor designate” (206). Prof. Ikin will stun everybody when he will refuse the honour to be bestowed on him and criticise the plan to send him to the US:

I consider the proposed visit an insult to my intelligence on two grounds. Firstly, it seems absurd that I should travel all the way to the States in order to study the philosophy of Songhai University. I have been actively engaged in educational development in this country for twenty odd years and I don't see who in America is qualified to teach me the philosophy of education best suited for Songhai. [...] The importance attached to my acquisition of a doctorate degree suggests that I'm not academically qualified to be Vice-Chancellor. A glance at the staff list of several major world universities, even within America, will show that a doctorate degree is not a prerequisite for headship of a university. A PhD is not a measure of a man's integrity, sense of responsibility, or administrative competence (233).

This unexpected decision, which precipitates the Vice-Chancellor's departure, signals a change of focus, with the Songhaians coming to the limelight and taking the power over from the foreigners.

Adichie's campus

Adichie's novels, published in 2004 and 2006, complement Ike's picture – one of them even places him in the picture as “Mr. Vincent Ikenna, the Registrar” (2006: 178) going round to ensure all staff evacuated the campus on 7th July 1967.²² Although centred on the University and presenting it as a place “immersed in a mesh of soft feathers” (2006: 52), where “life was insular” (2006: 133), they replace it in its immediate surroundings and put it back on the Nigerian map, approaching it from the Ninth Mile-Nsukka road²³ in *Purple Hibiscus* and from a broader, national perspective in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. We follow the author on the local “untarred roads [which] coat cars with dust in the harmattan and with sticky mud in the rainy season”, whose air “smells of hills and history” (2004: 299). Most of the action, again, takes place on the Nsukka campus, well known to Adichie who grew up there - her father, like Odenigbo (the main protagonist of her second novel and senior lecturer) lectured in Mathematics.²⁴ These books evoke a very different University, now totally manned by Nigerians and where expatriates²⁵ are on their way out. Her novels are equally different in other ways: whereas Ike chose to focus on the University as a workplace, Adichie penetrates its residential areas and reveals a rather intimate campus, a home away from home, a web of friendships strongly supported by the Church (St Peter).²⁶ She thus confirms Ogbachie's remark (2002) that “the UNN campus was a small close-knit community and tragedy affecting any single significant individual struck everyone equally”. The same picture was later used by Ezugwu (2007:7) who wrote about “the family of the University of Nigeria”. Unsurprisingly, Adichie's focus on lecturers' daily life also highlights the intellectual impact of the University on its student and staff population.

Her second novel, set in the 1960s, describes a newly-built lower campus enjoying uninterrupted water and electricity supply²⁷, with its Works Department contributing to the supply of additional amenities. *Half of a Yellow Sun* also reveals the difficulties UNN still faced to be recognised as a centre of excellence, with many, including some prominent Igbo in Lagos, thinking that “the idea of Nsukka University was silly, that

Nigeria was not ready for an indigenous university and that receiving support from an American university – rather than a proper university in Britain – was plain daft” (2004:32). Its lecturers’ commitment and academic competence, on the other hand, benefiting from the expertise of Igbo scholars returned from UI in 1966-67²⁸, set UNN as a place of excellence whose daily life revolves, much more than in Ike’s novel, around books: in Odenigbo’s bungalow, “there were books piled on the shelves and tables in the three bedrooms, on the sink and cabinets in the bathroom, stacked from floor to ceiling in the study” (6). In this remote environment, well away from the social networking of the capital city, highly politicised students and staff focus on teaching and learning – “how can we resist exploitation if we don’t have the tools to understand exploitation?” (6). At the time, Nsukka is still “full of people from USAID²⁹ and the Peace Corps and Michigan State University” (76), but their impact on the student population seems already minimal, and Odenigbo’s bungalow serves as a meeting point to a group of indigenous lecturers whose evenings are spent in academic debates before they “retired to [their] study for hours” (13). This will not escape the attention of federal soldiers who will pillage the campus, pile and burn most of the books and research papers from both lecturers’ homes and the University library, accusing the “book people” of what was “essentially an Igbo Institution” (Hanson 1968: 360) of having “planned the rebellion with Ojukwu” (416).³⁰ Adichie’s novel confirms the fact that throughout the war, UNN remained the lecturers’ postal address (Ike 1986: 44) as they transferred their skills in the service of their young nation, with Okeoma³¹ in the army, Odenigbo in the Manpower Directorate, Dr. Nwala Chief Medical Officer at the Albatross Hospital, Prof. Ezeka Director for Mobilisation and Prof. Ekwenugo producing and laying “high-impact landmines [...], brake fluid from coconut oil, [and] car engines from scrap metal” (198) with the Science Group.

Historical landmarks are equally present in *Purple Hibiscus* (2004), and a few passing details on the political climate and the death of the then Head of State seem to date the novel from the years of the Abacha regime³². Yet one of the most striking features of the novel is the exactitude of topographic details concerning the town and campus as we discover them under their real names, through the eyes of the young

Kambili on her first visit to Nsukka. Adichie deliberately chose to signpost the 40 minutes drive from Enugu GRA³³ to Nsukka: the popular stop at Ninth Mile Corner to make the traditional purchase of bread and *okpa* “wrapped in hot banana leaves” (54), the unavoidable police checkpoint on the high way, and then Nsukka’s busy market welcoming visitors at the southern entrance to the town, before a last right turn leading to Eastern shop supermarket³⁴ and the University gate. The majestic entrance joins the campus to the town while ushering visitors into a very different world: “a wide arch towered over us, bearing the words *University of Nigeria Nsukka* in black, cut-out metal. The gates underneath the arch were flung wide open and manned by security men in dark brown uniforms and matching berets” (111). Immediately past the entrance, the eyes are attracted to the statue of “a black lion standing on its hind legs, tail curbed upwards, chest puffed out” (112), with the University motto inscribed below - a perfect description of the University logo.³⁵

Whereas the second novel is set at the lower end of the campus, in the Odim residential area, *Purple Hibiscus* centres on the upper end, at the foot of the nearby Odenigbo Hill. Marguerite Cartwright Avenue, Auntie Ifeoma’s address and key to the understanding of the novel, is one of the first places you discover up campus: you just “keep straight and then make a right at the first junction and an almost immediately left” (112). Later, we follow Auntie Ifeoma’s car down the steep street that connects Marguerite Cartwright Avenue with Ikejiani and Fulton avenues below. On Fulton Avenue, next to the Institute of African Studies, we discover the University primary school, which “used to be so much better” – now “dirty buildings” with open windows that lost their louvers, yet still retain their wide yard “enclosed by trimmed whistling pine hedge” (129). Nearby stand St Peter’s Catholic Church and its chaplaincy. The car then moves past the female student hostels: Mary Slessor, Okpara Hall and Bello Hall, and moves down, eventually reaching the junior staff quarters “where the secretaries and drivers lived” (130), and Odim Hill, towering over the campus and marking the border between the University and the neighbouring village. Marguerite Cartwright Avenue is aptly described in the same accurate way, with its *gmelina* trees, its professorial duplexes “with

gravel-covered driveways” at one end, close to the Vice-Chancellor’s lodge, and its decrepit blocks of flats at the other end; later, we learn – one more strikingly accurate detail – that the Director of the Medical Centre lived there too, in one of the duplexes (153).

The novel situates the University in space by mentioning a few landmarks in town - Nsukka High School, the Eastern Shop, the market - and briefly evokes some of the perennial problems faced by campus residents: the lack of water and NEPA³⁶ sudden blackouts that prompted occasional student riots; the impossibility to buy gas cylinders, too dear for the average budget, and shortages of petrol that could last for months. Ifeoma “spent the night in the petrol station [...] waiting for fuel. And at the end, the fuel did not come. Some people left their cars in the station because they did not have enough fuel to drive back home” (76). As if life was not complicated enough on campus, the University had been paralysed by strikes, and the last has just been called off “even though no lecturer has been paid for the last two months” (76). For Kambili and her brother, life on Nsukka campus is drastically different from the luxury they enjoyed in their Enugu mansion; yet this very basic existence revolving around house chores and simple pleasures hides an invaluable treasure behind the old, cracked, mismatched and worn out furniture: “Nsukka could free something deep inside your belly that would rise up to your throat and come out as a freedom song” (299). The picture given here of the University, away from the ivory tower painted by its detractors, is that of a vibrant teaching and learning community, yet a part of town, facing the same difficulties and sharing the same destiny while leading the way into a global future.

Conclusion

Ike’s novel mentioned (210) that in those early days, “the newspapers had [...] been instructed not to publish any editorial or item which could bring discredit to the Songhai University”. The open letter published in the Nigerian *Daily Sun* on May 17, 2009 and titled: “Appoint Nsukka indigene UNN VC” would tend to show

that if things have changed since then, some of the tensions evoked in *The Naked Gods* have remained. Asogwa reminds his readers of the University's history and the claim of the town over its land: "After the debate and approval by the Eastern Nigeria House of Assembly in 1955 for the establishment of a university, the Nsukka people donated the massive expanse of land upon which the institution was sited. Construction work started by the late 50s and by October 17, 1960, lectures commenced at the university." He goes on to lament the ensuing "chequered administration history since the exit of the Americans" and the fact that "the institution that was founded to shape the destiny of our race and nation and produce the best libraries, laboratories and professors so that our continent could become a "continent of light" has become a "den of darkness." These problems, he blames on the lack of cohesion within the University. For him, the way to restore the Institution to its former glory is to make it truly local:

in Nsukka cultural zone alone, there are more than 30 Professors qualified to occupy that exalted position. Moreover, after 50 years of donating 1010 hectares of land, excluding those at Okpuje and Agu Erike, no Nsukka man has ever been found worthy to occupy any of the four principal offices (VC, Registrar, Bursar and Librarian) in the University. [...] Therefore, it will be just and in line with the current trend in the nation to appoint one of the eminent professors from Nsukka as the next UNN VC. The people of Nsukka constitute 50 per cent of the population of Enugu State, apart from being landlords of the university. This is the only way to sustain and guarantee the rejuvenated development of UNN and ensure that its beautiful soft green hills and plains remain calm, peaceful and productive" (Asogwa 2007:2).

Let us consider, with Ike (1986: 174), that "the teething problems of yester-years [have] come to pass." Rising above petty squabbles and local frustrations, the novels under scrutiny, drawing heavily on historical details, remind their readers of the resilience of the University. They convey the message that, in spite of its rural setting, "away from news about the country" (Adichie 2006: 133), in spite of the ravages of the war which temporarily scattered its staff and battered its campuses, in spite of internal parochial tensions and relentless efforts from various quarters to erase it from the map, UNN stayed true to its mission "to restore the dignity of man", thriving against the odds, exerting a strong influence on Nigerian academia and building lasting links with other institutions of Higher learning all over the world. Ike and Adichie have the merit to highlight its role as a leading Institution of Higher Learning where "Education is a priority" (Adichie 2006:11) and as an Alma mater, nurturing and inspiring, not only its staff and its student

population of “lions and lionesses”, but their families. In the words of Obiechina (1986: xv), and as Nigeria celebrates its 50th anniversary, this is definitely “a story that must be told”.

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¹ The University of Ibadan (UI) was founded by the colonial British authorities in the Southwest of the country in 1948 as a College of the University of London and opened with 104 students. Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, one of first generation universities, opened in 1962. Bayero University became a University in 1977 after serving as one of ABU's Faculties for several years. For more on UNN's history, read Obiechina (ed) 1986.

² Nnamdi Azikiwe (1904-1996), popularly known as Zik, PhD Anthropology (Lincoln, Pennsylvania 1929), Nigerian statesman and journalist, was behind the creation of UNN. He became Premier, Eastern Region (1954-1960), then Governor General (1960-1963) and was the first President of Nigeria (1963-1966).

³ <http://www.blackpast.org/?q=1955-nnamdi-azikiwe-university-nigeria-speech>. The pamphlet circulated during the formal opening of the University read: "the University of Nigeria is built upon the faith that Education can and should make a difference in the society it serves" (Hanson 1968: 108).

⁴ The four parallel avenues of the upper campus, Elias, Marguerite Cartwright, Ikejiani and Fulton, were named after these dignitaries.

⁵ Leading to an A' level directed towards teaching.

⁶ The accusation that "the secession plan was hatched at the University of Nigeria Nsukka" was voiced by Gowon himself as early as November 1967 at Ibadan, and "the capture of the University town [...] ranked among the important objectives of the initial federal strategy for the civil war" (Ike 1986: 45).

⁷ In 1973, UNN only received 30% of its funding from the federal Government, whereas Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, got 75% of its funding from the same Federal Government (Lebeau 1997:75).

⁸ This project was halted as the National Open University project was already in the offing. The National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), originally founded on 22nd July 1983, finally became operational on 12th April 2001.

⁹ Nigerian undergraduates and postgraduates were already studying in the States before Independence - their number grew from 226 in 1956 to 1382 in 1965 (Hanson 1968:77). Kom (1993: 64-65) was able to "compile an impressive, yet incomplete list of Nigerian scholars 'exiled' in the USA since the mid-1980s" (Lebeau 1997: 34 note 15).

¹⁰ 14, 911 students and 899 academic staff in 1989/90, 18,000 students in 1997, according to official statistics. Today, UNN continues recruiting students from the whole federation and beyond, although some 70% of its students still come from Igboland. Sources: NUC annual report 1990, http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-30803-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html for 1990 and <http://www.blackcollegian.com/issues/1997-10/bumpy.shtml> and <http://www.dawodu.com/aluko6> for 1997.

¹¹ Formerly from the Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, UNN.

¹² From now on and within the paragraphs focusing on Ike's novel, all references to the novel will only mention the page number.

¹³ UNN is the only Nigerian University built in a rural location. According to Ijomah (1986: 6), the 10,000 acres of land needed for the campus were "compulsorily acquired". Ofomata (1986: 97) gives more details about the land acquisition: an original site of 393 hectares, "enlarged by successive acquisitions to 871 hectares" plus "a further site of 270 hectares" some six kilometres away from the main site, to be used as a satellite. Enugu campus was 200 hectares wide.

¹⁴ For more details on the beneficial impact of UNN on the Nsukka community, read Odokara 1986.

¹⁵ Compare with the "fantastic array of physical and academic problems" reported by Hanson (1968:22) as plaguing UNN in the early 1960s.

¹⁶ A reference to the nickname of 'boat people' *ndi Ugbo*, often given by northern Igbo to those of Onitsha area – a reference to their living close to the Niger. For more details on this perennial lobby, read Asogwa 2009.

¹⁷ Obiechina (1986: xvii) described the relationship of town and gown as "a happy symbiosis".

¹⁸ In England and Wales, a College limited to the two most senior classes at secondary level, to which pupils, usually above the legal leaving age, may enrol to take A' levels or retake GCSEs.

¹⁹ Again, a situation very similar to that of the post-war period, where "Nigerian universities [were] characterised by internal conflicts, including those between administration and academics", leading to complaints from lecturers that "the academics are at the mercy of administrators" (Anyakoha 1999: 2 & 21).

²⁰ Compare with Hanson 1968: 194 reporting UNN students' initial reservations on the quality of their teaching.

²¹ Probably a reminiscence of the honorary degree bestowed on Prof. Eni Njoku by UNN and his one year visiting stint at Michigan State University before his tenure as VC at UNN. Cf. Ike 1986: 32-33.

²² Compare with Ike 1986: 41: "the Registrar [...] received instruction from the government representative at Nsukka. Every human being was to be evacuated from Nsukka before midnight. [...] After driving round the campus to ensure that every householder knew the government instructions, the registrar joined the mass flow out of Nsukka."

²³ Ninth Mile has been a busy road interchange and industrial platform, an obliged passage on the north-south road, connecting Enugu with Nsukka northward and Onitsha southward.

²⁴ James Nwoye Adichie (1932-), from Abba (Anambra State), read mathematics at the then University College Ibadan (UCI), 1957-60, and lectured in Enugu and UNN, 1960-63. He was the first Nigerian to get a PhD in Statistics from the University of

California at Berkeley in 1966 before returning to UNN. There, he helped to establish the Department of Statistics, became a professor in 1976 and served as Head of Department, Dean and Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Nsukka Campus. Like most of the academic staff, the Adichie family lived on campus, and, at a time, occupied the house where Achebe lived in the 1970s.

²⁵ *Half of a Yellow Sun* mentions four of them – Richard Churchill, a British researcher who will later join the new Institute of African Studies, Professor Lehman, an American, Dr. Patel, an Indian, and Mr. Johnson, from the West Indies. Most expatriates left in the early 1980s after the devaluation of the naira.

²⁶ St Peter's Catholic Church was one of the two Churches on campus, the other, Christ Church, serving the whole Protestant community.

²⁷ This contrasts with Hanson's report (1968: 22) on UNN in the early 1960s, which stated that "water was uncertain, electrical failures were frequent."

²⁸ Such as Dr. Achara, "the new lecturer in Physics" who just came back from Ibadan (2006: 158).

²⁹ According to Ike (1986:33), "a formidable team of supporting personnel".

³⁰ "As members of the Planning and Management Committee of the University learnt on their first visit to the campus after the end of the war, it gave some of the victorious soldiers special kicks to cast the fattest library books into the fire and watch them burst into flame, having been made to believe that it was too much 'bukuru' that precipitated the war" (Ike 1986: 42).

³¹ Clearly inspired by Okigbo, a former lecturer in the Department of English. Here again, Adichie's novel matches details given in Ike (1986: 47): "the Research and Production Group, popularly known as RaP, gave the scientists, engineers and technologists at the University an opportunity not only to make invaluable contributions to the war efforts, but also to surprise even themselves at their own inventiveness. [...] What RaP provided for the scientists and engineers, the Propaganda Directorate did for University staff in the humanities and social sciences."

³² Sani Abacha's dictatorship lasted from 1993 to 1998; he died while in office.

³³ The Government residential area, reserved for top civil servants.

³⁴ The fact that Eastern Shop, the first modern supermarket in town, a stone's throw from the campus, is mentioned without explanation seems to indicate the author's intention to nod to the insiders reading her book.

³⁵ The origin of the praise name of "lions and lionesses" traditionally bestowed on UNN alumni. Cf. Ajayi 2007: 1, <http://nigeriaworld.com/columnist/ajayi/101307.html>

³⁶ National Electric Power Authority.